

Tarot Through the Ages

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Abel Alves', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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The Origins of Tarot

The origins of the tarot are mysterious. Many myths have circulated about the cards and where they came from. Some speculate that the common modern 52-card deck is a descendent of the original tarot or tarocchi deck, while others argue that the smaller deck was created first. While it is widely used for fortune telling or divination today, tarot was originally created for gaming purposes.

When the cards became tools of divination is unclear. Some claim that did not happen until as late as the nineteenth century, but others argue that French occultists introduced the cards as a form of divination in the eighteenth century. It is difficult to find more on the tarot as a divination tool before the eighteenth century because of scarce documentation, but this does not necessarily mean the tarot was not used as a fortune telling device in earlier times.

Popular modern tarot seems to focus on the French occult movement of the eighteenth century, which explains why we call it tarot and not tarocco or tarocchi. Sir Arthur Edward Waite (one designer of the most common modern tarot deck, the Rider-Waite tarot deck), clearly states in his introduction to *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot*, "It should be understood that it is not put forward as a contribution to the history of playing cards, about which I know and care nothing; it is a consideration dedicated and addressed to a certain school of occultism, more especially in France."(viii)

Although Waite saw little use for the history of playing cards, it is important to study just that when one is trying to find the origins of tarot cards. The origins of regular playing cards are quite murky as well, but one good theory suggests that they came into Europe from Egypt. These cards, called Mameluke cards, date back to the twelfth or

thirteenth century, and had four suits of swords, polo sticks, cups and coins. These suits are extremely similar to the Italian suits where the only change is that batons (or wands) were substituted for polo sticks. Michael McKay presents further evidence that the Egyptian cards were the predecessors of the Italian cards by explaining that the Egyptian court cards or face cards consisted of the Malik or King, Na'ib Malik or Deputy King, and Thani Na'ib or Second Under-Deputy. The evidence here is the Italian name for cards: naibbe, and the Spanish name, naipes. According to McKay, naibbe appears in documents as far back as 1376, and naip appears in a document from Catalan in 1371.

The common playing card suits we have (diamonds, hearts, clubs and spades) are the French suits, however the date of their original appearance is unknown. Charles VI of France ordered three decks of cards from an artist named Jacquemin Gringonneur in 1392, but unfortunately no one knows what these cards looked like. The account of the Gringonneur card describes them as, "Three packs of cards, guilt and colored, and variously ornamented." (Giles, 12) Though the cards that were made for Charles VI certainly sound extravagant, there is no way to tell what their suits were, or if they might have even been tarot cards.

Different countries favored different suits in early card decks. The now standard French suits were one grouping, while the Italian suits survive in modern tarot decks, but other groupings such as the German acorns, leaves, hearts and bells also existed. These common card decks were widely used throughout Western Europe beginning in the late fourteenth century, and city records refer to them in Florence in 1376, Basil in 1377 and Nuremberg in 1382. (Smoller, 184) This suggests that the cards spread through Europe from the South. This goes along with the theory that the cards came from Egypt, although

and account from 1480 by an Italian writer named Corvelluzo suggests that the cards were brought “into Viterbo from the country of the Saracens where it is called naib,” (Irwin, 2) in 1379.

Though some speculate that the gypsies or Romani brought the cards with them, most modern scholars believe this is not likely since the Romani did not appear in Western Europe until the early fifteenth century. The Romani did originally come from India, however, and were in the Middle East and Eastern Europe by the time cards became popular in Western Europe. This brings the question of whether the Egyptians may have borrowed the card game from the Indians, who did have playing cards. McKay cites Michael Dummett in his explanation of the theory that Mameluke cards could have been a version of the Indian game Ganjifa (or Kanjifah in Arabic). McKay further explains that the word Kanjifah, “Appeared in an inscription of one of the circa 1400 Mameluke cards.” Another object for consideration is that the Hindu figure of Ardhanari (the compilation of Shiva’s male and female sides) holds a cup, a scepter, a sword and a ring in her four hands. These symbols are quite close to the Mameluke and Italian suits, suggesting a further connection between India or the Middle East and early cards. Although this may be a possibility to the origin of playing cards, where tarot came from is still a mystery.

What we do know is that in 1442, the Visconti family of Milan had a deck custom made with trumps or “triumphs” (the Italian is trionfi). These trumps (22 in all) were used in addition to the 56 pips or number and court cards in the game of tarocchi. Tarocchi was a trick taking game similar to euchre and versions of it, “...are still played in a number of European countries, namely: Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, France,

Germany, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia, Slovenia and Switzerland.” (MacLeod, Tarot Games Index) The deck mentioned earlier was made in honor of the marriage of Bianca Marie Visconti and Francesco Sforza and shows symbols of both families on the cards. Another deck was made with only Visconti family symbols, but the date of this deck (the Cary-Yale Visconti) is indeterminable. Some believe that both decks were created by the same artist, in which case, a date for the Cary-Yale Visconti might be pinpointed, but only if the artist were known. The two top contenders are member of the Zavattari family, which could place the cards as early as 1420, and Bonifacio Bembo from Cremona, which would place the cards after 1440. (Irwin, 7) In any case, it is safe to say that the tarot cards were introduced into Western Europe by 1442, if not before.

The trumps’ appearance in 1442 means that it is possible chronologically for the Romani to have brought them, however another more likely hypothesis is that the trumps, “... were based on the popular Renaissance “triumph,” of festive procession preceding lent.” (Irwin, 9) The procession was one of virtues and the vices over which they triumphed, and this theory, originally proposed by Gertrude Moakley, seems to fit in with the images on the trumps. This case seems especially strong when one considers that the cards were called “cartes da trionfi” or “cards with trumps” (or triumphs) in the beginning and that the name “tarocco” or “tarocchi” does not appear in the record books until 1516. (Giles, 3)

The name tarocco is an interesting one. Where did it come from? What does it mean? The answers to these questions are hidden, but perhaps if they were known they could explain more about the cards and their use both as a game and as a form of divination. There are many theories about where the name of the cards originated, from it

being and anagram for “rotta,” the Latin word for wheel, to the possibility of Qabbalistic connections to the Torah. One such theory is that the name could have come from an Arabic word, “tarikua,” meaning “the way.” (Giles, 4) If the root of tarocco is tarikua, this name could have come from Romani people who had spent time in the Middle East before venturing into Western Europe. The Romani were known for fortune telling though usually by palm reading, and though they did use cards, usually it was a four suited deck, so most tarot theorists discount the possibility of the name coming from the Romani.

There is an interesting modern tarot designer named Tchailai, who calls herself Romani, and claims in her *Instruction for Tzigane Tarot* that, “We Roms possess tarots which have come to us from the “Chaturangas” that our ancestors the Rajput Princes had painted on round pieces of mother of pearl or leather. We draw them for one another following our elaborate and familiar laws which make life so livable.” (The Traveling Bohemians Web Site) This suggests that the original round Indian playing cards could have been used for divination. Tchailai goes on to say, “This Tarot is not polluted by centuries of erroneous interpretations like most others. This is why it has great precision at a divinatory level. Originating in the age old wisdom of the Roms, its indications are vigorous, simple, easy to apply.” That Tchailai calls her cards tarots is interesting because it seems that her use of tarot is not as a specific type of trumps, but a way of fortune telling. Perhaps the answer is that the root of tarot is a method of divination that can be done with any cards, while the specific cards we think of as tarot today are the original Italian trumps with a regular four suited deck.

This is an interesting thought, but the idea that many scholars hold (that tarot was not a form of divination until the eighteenth century) goes against any form of divination at the time that tarot was introduced. That the cards were considered something more than just fun at the time they were introduced, is evident in accounts such as one made by a friar in Umbria sometime around 1500. "There is nothing so hateful to God as the game of trumps," states the Franciscan friar. "For trumps are said, so it is believed, to have been given their names by the Devil, their inventor, because in no other game does he triumph (with the loss of souls to boot) as much as in this one." (Giles, 7)

The friar was not the only one to think that tarot cards had some connection with evil. In 1589 a woman named Isabella Bellochio was brought before the Italian Inquisition because she had lit a holy lamp in front of the Devil card in her tarot deck. According to Bellochio she did this, "So that Milano [her lover] would come to [her]." (Ruggiero, 97) Isabella was not using the tarot cards for divination, but it is clear that she was not using them for a game and perhaps that because they had images such as the one of the Devil on them, they had some connection with magic or witchcraft. If the cards did have some sort of association with magic, they were most likely considered to be low magic, and not high magic such as alchemy, which was considered more acceptable. Indeed, Queen Elizabeth's court mathematician and astrologer, John Dee was a practitioner of high magic (or natural magic). Despite his interest in alchemy and astrology, though, Dee never showed an interest in the tarot, either because it was seen only as a game, or because it was too low a form of magic for him to bother with. (Giles, 64)

There is some other evidence that tarot may have been used for divination in the sixteenth century, though not very much. In 1527, Merlini Cocai wrote a play in which the protagonist composes sonnets based on four readings that were done with the tarot trumps. For the readings, the men were dealt five cards and the women six and the fates of the recipients were told by interpretations of the cards. Giles expresses doubts about whether this is evidence of the cards being used for divination, however, because, "... these fates [seem] more along the lines of character-reading and general philosophizing than true divination." (20) One could argue, however, that modern tarot divination is often used to gain personal insight, and not necessarily to predict events. Different people use the tarot in different ways. Aside from Cocai's play, the evidence for tarot as a divination tool is scarce, although there is another account that might point in this direction. In 1572, Giralamo Gargagli wrote about a game of tarocchi that he witnessed in which, "... each participant was given the name from a card, and then the reasons were stated aloud why each participant had been attributed to such a tarocchi card." (Giles 19) Although this account is decidedly not fortune telling, it does show that people saw a symbolism of some sort could be drawn from the cards.

Ultimately it is very difficult to discern whether or not the cards were used for fortune telling before the eighteenth century, including that this would have been considered heresy and therefore, not something that would be made public. Another possible reason is that in the case that the cards were used for this purpose, the people who used them who have probably been of lower stations and would not have been likely to record their actions for posterity. In any case it does not appear that tarot was widely used as a divination tool in the first few centuries of its existence.

Tarot and the Occult

The widespread use of tarot as a divination tool began in the eighteenth century in France. A scholar of the occult by the name of Antoine Court de Gébelin saw a few foreign visitors playing a game of tarot in 1775 and immediately was taken with the symbolism of the cards. (Giles, 22) Court de Gébelin described his first encounter with the tarot cards in precise detail. "I glanced at it and as soon as I did, I recognized the allegory...in a quarter of an hour the deck had been gone through and proclaimed Egyptian. And since this was not a figment of our imagination, but rather the result of selected and sensible knowledge of this game in connection with everything that was known about Egyptian Ideas, we promised ourselves to surely make it known to the public one day." (Giles, 23) By bringing the tarot to the public's attention, Court de Gébelin would have revealed the occult (or hidden) wisdom he believed they held. This was a substantial goal, and one many would take on over the next century.

Court de Gébelin worked with the Comte de Mellet to establish a theory about the cards and their power in his work, *Le Monde Primitif* in the year 1781, fulfilling his promise to share the symbolism of the cards with the public. Court de Gébelin's theory heavily focused on the idea that the cards had come from Egypt, a notion he had taken on first seeing the cards, although there was no sound evidence for this idea. The Comte de Mellet did link the tarot with the Hebrew alphabet and the Kabbalah, but this idea was not explored extensively in a written work until the nineteenth century when Eliphas Levi made the same connection on his own.

Court de Gébelin's work was the spark that moved the common people to establish rules for divination by tarot. A man named Alliette who was a hairstylist and

algebra teacher (Kaplan, II.398) jumped on this new idea and was inspired to write his own work about tarot and make up several of his own theories about its mystical origins. Etteilla, as Alliette called himself, lived in Paris and had several clients in the higher classes. His ideas may not have been based in historical fact, but were apparently amusing and convincing for he lived in comfort and eventually made his living from fortune telling.

Etteilla's work went a long way toward popularizing tarot with those that were not necessarily occult enthusiasts, but average people who wished to have their fortunes read. The ideas Etteilla put forth as fact were not accepted as fact by serious occult scholars, but they did gain acceptance of the image of tarot cards as fortune telling tools, an image which still carries over into modern thought. Etteilla's theories lead to the creation of several new decks, some of which still exist. These "Etteilla decks" were apparently mass produced and sold for as little as three francs, but although they claim to be Etteilla's own design, all of the existing decks date to 1800 or later, at least nine years after the popular fortune teller's death. Etteilla's ideas, however, lived long after his death, and an Etteilla deck entitled *78 Tarots Egyptiens Grand Jeu de l'Oracle des Dames* (78 Egyptian Tarots Great Game of the Oracle of Ladies) was published as late as 1890, a century after Alliette died. (Kaplan, II.398)

It is interesting to note that tarot's spread as a popular method of fortune telling came in the midst of the age of enlightenment and reason. Though today one would not associate fortune telling cards with reason and science, perhaps the people of the eighteenth century would base their faith in the cards on numerology or ancient codes. These ideas may seem a bit preposterous, but one might argue that we can predict

the future of our own lives by our genetic codes today. Another interesting point to consider is that the interest in tarot as a means of divination started in the later half of the eighteenth century in France. At the time, France was headed toward revolution and the state of society's hierarchy and the national economy were by no means secure. There was a move toward paganism and occultism including new mystery religions and a fascination with ideas such as mesmerism. Franz Anton Mesmer believed that there was a "...superfine fluid that penetrated and surrounded all bodies." (Darnton, 3) Mesmer claimed to be able to bring the invisible fluid to people and heal their ills through magnetism. The fluid would be harnessed in a great tub and then transferred to patients through stimulation of the body's magnetic poles, especially in the fingers and nose. (Darnton, 4) This idea may seem ridiculous today, but as Darnton points out, the world was awash with new invisible forces including Newton's gravity and Franklin's Electricity among others. (10) With all of these working invisible forces, it seems logical enough that there could be an invisible force that predicted the future.

Perhaps French citizens were merely searching for a mystical answer that would put sense and order into their tumultuous existence. Christianity was synonymous with the monarchy, especially after the reign of Louis XIV whose absolutist regime had ravaged the economy and ended only half a century earlier. The traditions established by Louis XIV left his successors scrambling to keep control of their subjects with little to offer in return. It is easy to see why the general populace might turn to other sources of help than the Christian God or the monarchy who had gotten them into this place. Indeed, during the Revolution the Emperor and Empress cards were renamed the Grandfather and Grandmother cards in France, showing a distinct turning from governmental authority to

familiar wisdom. (Kaplan, II.154) This change is a significant and interesting one, because the original Italian cards would have played up the image of authoritative governors because they were made for the use of noble families. Instead in the French Revolutionary Tarot, the Grandmother and Grandfather cards depict a matronly woman in a turban and a man in a nightcap contemplating a flower. (Kaplan, I.155) Neither of these figures wears a crown, as they would in normal decks. That the image would change in eighteenth century France shows that tarot had become the tool of the common man more than the noble man, and also that the attitudes of lay people toward their rulers were decidedly different in the two times and places. Lynn Hunt Examines the dynamics of French Government and the traditional patriarchal family structure in *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, where she brings up the question of whether abolishing absolutism meant also abolishing traditional family order. (5) Because the King was often looked at as the father of the country, this image was by-passed in favor of an older and gentler figure in the grandfather.

Other standard images had changed by the late eighteenth century as well. On noticeable change was the image of the fool. The original fool had been an old beggar man with rags for clothes and bony legs. By the late eighteenth century the fool appeared as a young man with colorful clothing and a dog. He often carried a knapsack and walking stick, suggesting a traveler. The fool of the late eighteenth century had picked up the visual symbolism that is most often associated with the fool card today, that of a carefree go lucky adventurer who may have a tendency toward recklessness. The fool of the late eighteenth century did not appear bony, but rather healthy, and his clothes were quite as nice as the magician's clothes. These images suggest once again that the

common perception had changed. Perhaps this can be attributed to the audience, as nobles would have thought a beggar to be dirty poor and common, while the tarot clientele of the eighteenth century would perhaps have been more forgiving. Hunt points out that, "After the death of the king, deputies carried forward the attack on paternal prerogatives... especially the control of fathers over their grown children." (65) This was a result of the French need for fraternité, or brotherhood. The culture was turning its favor to youth and vitality instead of experienced age and tyranny. The image had changed in Italy as well as in France (as evidenced by the Milanese Tarot, Kaplan I.154), suggesting that this was not simply a French rebellion against traditional authority.

The age of enlightenment marked a departure from traditional Christian views elsewhere as well. Thomas Jefferson was known to be a deist, believing in a God, though not necessarily the Christian God that the Bible presented. In a letter written in 1803, Jefferson clearly states, "To the corruptions of Christianity I am, indeed, opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian, in the only sense in which he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines." (Johnson) Although Christianity was still the dominant Western religion, the rigid attitude toward heretics was loosening somewhat, perhaps easing the way for tarot and other occult ideas to emerge openly. By this time in Western Europe, inquisitions were not executing heretics so much anymore, and the danger lay more in the political arena. The atmosphere of Revolution fostered intellectual and social changes that might not have been possible earlier, and made for a transition from reason to romanticism, which prevailed in the nineteenth century and provided a rich environment for occult ideology.

Alphonse Louis Constant, born in 1810, was the first student of the tarot to investigate the link between the tarot and the Hebrew alphabet and philosophy. (Giles, 28) Constant was a man who had turned from his training as a Catholic priest to study journalism and the occult. A dedicated student, Constant coined the term "occultism" and adopted his own pseudonym for his writings on the subject. As Eliphas Lévi Zahed, Constant explored in great detail, his ideas of the tarot as a key to universal wisdom first recorded by kabbalists. "When the Ark was lost, the sanctuary profaned, and the Temple destroyed, the mysteries of Ephod and Theraphim, no longer recorded on gold and precious stones, were written or rather figured by certain wise kabbalists first on ivory, parchment, on gilt and silvered leather, and afterwards on simple cards." (Giles, 29) Here we are given Constant's own origins of the tarot, based on his connection of the tarot with the Hebrew Tree of Life.

The Tree of Life is a diagram that contains twenty-two paths (the same number of trump cards in tarot) between ten sephiroth, or sapphires of wisdom. The rest of the deck was connected to the Tree of Life as well; based on the ten sephiroth each being assigned a number, which in turn corresponded with the numbered pips. The court cards were representative of their suits as the four kabbalistic worlds from divine creation to material existence. By understanding the connections between these paths and the tarot, Constant believed that, "An imprisoned person, with no other book than the Tarot, if he knew how to use it, could in a few years acquire universal knowledge and would be able to speak on all subjects with unequalled learning and inexhaustible eloquence." (Giles, 30)

Constant, like many at the time was trying to divine the meaning of life and the universe and gain transcendental knowledge. Though the Rosetta Stone was discovered in

1799 and soon after, translated, the romantic ideas of exotic Egyptian mysteries lived on. The hieroglyphics showed no connection to the tarot, but even Constant believed there was a link between Egypt and tarot, suggesting a connection between the tarot and the Bembine Tablet of Isis (A large metal tablet covered in hieroglyphics that was thought to contain all the wisdom of the ancient world by the Hermetics of the Renaissance). (Giles, 28) The nineteenth century ushered in the romantic era when people began to rebel against the coldness of reason and instead investigate the emotions and transcendental feelings. The interest in the tarot did not wane, but enjoyed a growth as scholars tried to apply tarot symbolism to the new philosophy. The interest in Egypt did not die either, as tarot scholars continued to associate tarot with ancient Egyptian rituals. In 1870 Paul Christian published *The History of Magic* in which he described fully a ceremony which he claimed took place under the Egyptian pyramids in which an aspiring adept was led up 78 steps and through a hall painted with all the images of the tarot trumps. Christian's trumps took on an Egyptian theme while still showing the same basic images as the Italian trumps. The chariot, for instance, became the Chariot of Osiris. (Giles, 33)

The images on the cards changed with these new ideas. In 1889 Oswald Wirth, a follower of Constant, produced the first real occult tarot deck which featured the same Hebrew alphabet connection, but some of the images changed and reflected the occult ideas. (Kaplan, II.391) Wirth was a Freemason, Theosophist and a hypnotist, and therefore very interested in the occult symbolism of the tarot. The Magician in Wirth's deck closely resembles the same card form the Tarot of Marseilles (the deck Court de Gébelin first saw, which dates to the seventeenth century), but the items on the magician's table have become more clear and purposeful. (Kaplan II.157) In the

Marseilles deck, the magician appears to be a sleight of hand performer with a number of objects before him in no particular order. The objects include coins, juggling balls, a scarf, knives and a wand. These instruments do not seem to be greatly symbolic, but instead a practical set of objects for everyday use by a minor magician. In Wirth's deck, the Magician stands before a table with a carefully laid set of objects. A sword is laid across the center with coins surrounding it and a chalice resting in front of it. Like the Magician in the Marseilles deck, Wirth's magician holds a wand, and is apparently ready to understand the secrets of universal wisdom. The coins are large and obviously decorative, suggesting secret symbolic importance in their design, while the chalice is large and clearly not an ordinary drinking vessel. Kaplan believes these cards may have belonged to twentieth century occultist, Aleister Crowley. (II.391)

The three prominent names of the nineteenth century in relation to Tarot are Constant (Eliphas Lévi Zahed), Oswald Wirth, and Dr. Gerard Encausse. Encausse, who went by the alias of Papus, wrote the most recognized work of nineteenth century French occultist tarot with *The Tarot of the Bohemians*. This title brings back the image of the Romani, even while Papus makes a case for an Egyptian origin of the cards. This may make sense when one considers the Egyptian and gypsy connection, but by this time people knew that the gypsies were not from Egypt. Papus claims that Egyptian priests recorded their secrets in a game (tarot) after deciding that passing down the knowledge through virtuous men in each generation was no certain way of preserving the knowledge. (Giles, 35)

Encausse (or Papus) was very interested in the occult and together with the Marquis Stanislaus de Guaita, he founded the Cabalistic Order of the Rosy Cross. De Guaita was an interesting character who favored red for décor and dress and was often

accused of dressing as a cardinal. (Giles, 36) De Guaita was also said to practice astral projection (separating soul from body to engage in spiritual journeys) and keep a familiar spirit locked in a cupboard. Of course de Guaita was also known to experiment heavily with drugs, and that combined with his lack of solid support for his arguments on occult issues did not lead his work to be considered among the most important tarot studies.

With all of this occult activity in the late nineteenth century, it is not terribly surprising that a large society devoted to the occult sprang to life in March of 1888. This society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, was made up of serious occult scholars as well as artists who wished to study symbolism. William Butler Yeats was among the more notable members and his preservation of several notebooks and letters pertaining to the group are very useful today. The Golden Dawn was different from other secret societies of its time because it admitted women among its ranks. The atmosphere of the Order was very strict in that all members were diligent in the study and correct practice of esoteric and occult arts. Several types of occult arts were practiced and networked together including tarot, alchemy, kabbalah and ritual magic. The members of this order were all required to make their own tarot decks based on one master copy. The members were also required to meditate on the tarot images and keep strict and elaborate journals. Tarot Cards were even used in rituals to represent certain things. This blending of occult ideas led to the development of the tarot, as we know it today. Cards can contain Hebrew or Egyptian symbolism, often both and still be considered traditional tarot cards.

In 1900 the order divided as Yeats had conflicts with a man named McGregor Mathers who sent, according to Yeats, "... a mad person— whom we had refused to initiate—to take the possession of the rooms and papers of the society."(Giles, 43)

Mathers had in fact sent Aleister Crowley, who was then a young apprentice. Although Crowley's attempt to take over the Order of the Golden Dawn at this time was unsuccessful he would later enjoy a great deal of notoriety with his Thoth tarot deck..

In 1903 Sir Arthur Edward Waite, the man responsible for today's popular Rider-Waite Tarot deck, took on leadership of the order and changed its name from the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn to the Holy Order of the Golden Dawn. Waite's interpretation of the tarot relies on traditional symbolism and his involvement with the order seemed to go away from magic, as he even goes so far as to describe Court de Gébelin as an archaeologist. (Waite, 9) Waite's idea that, "The tarot embodies symbolic presentations of universal ideas, behind which lie all the implicits of the human mind," (Waite, 59) has survived into modern times. This idea can perhaps account for the fifteenth century practice using the cards to represent people's personality traits, and has a lasting resonance that modern tarot readers recognize.

Modern Tarot

The twentieth century provided a market for tarot cards as a recreational device that was not available before. Many people who are not scholars of the occult may own a tarot deck today for the artwork that appears on the cards or for the enjoyment of fortune telling. Many people today also enjoy horoscopes, which appear in numerous magazines and newspapers. The casual acceptance of these things by the public is noteworthy since five hundred years ago they were considered heretical and people found practicing them could be punished. Because of this wider acceptance of new age or occult things, there are a great number of tarot decks being produced and reproduced for sale.

Of the various types of decks available for purchase today, there are many which do not follow traditional tarot format. These decks, such as angel cards and animal spirit cards are grouped with tarot cards because they are used to gain insight and spiritual awareness. Similarly tarot decks are designed for different types of questions. The Tarot of the Spirit, for instance is best used to develop one's spirituality and personal insight, while decks such as the classic Rider-Waite deck are used more for material and tangible predictions.

In some ways the serious modern tarot reader agrees with the occultists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Those scholars believed that the tarot held universal secrets and wisdom, while most modern tarot readers will assert that the symbolism in tarot cards is useful in unlocking one's own inner wisdom. Anyone who wishes to read for him or herself should find a deck that appeals to him or her, because a reader should feel a connection and easy understanding of the symbols that are produced. Metaphysical bookstore owner and tarot reader, Melissa Elmore states, "Someone picking out a deck should choose one that they have a strong feeling for, either through the visual images or just through the feeling of touching the cards, perhaps through a strange sensation or a vision. I would say usually your cards choose you, and not that you choose your cards."

Tarot can be a highly effective individual discovery tool, however, tarot today is also widely used for money making schemes as evidenced by the numerous "psychic phone networks" that are advertised on television and in print. While some of the self proclaimed psychics do wish to help people gain a better understanding of their lives, the majority are charlatans who wish only to keep unsuspecting patrons on the line for as long as possible so as to collect a higher fee. According to Elmore, "Tarot is a tool used

for a reader to delve into their own intuition. What I have discovered with the tarot is that the memorization of symbols and their meanings can be done, but I like to use the tarot to open up a psychic gateway and that looking at the cards makes information swoop through me. Most of the people that I know who read tarot cards professionally feel the same way.”

There are several common procedures that may be used in a modern tarot reading, but here we shall examine two basic reading practices. The first is a short one-question reading. This type of reading is useful when a person would like a quick answer relating to one specific question. The reader should shuffle his or her cards and concentrate on the question while removing three cards (face down) and turning them up in a row. The first card (on the left) represents the events or influences in the recent past of the questioner's life. For example, the chariot may represent indecision on the part of the questioner. Perhaps he or she is not sure which direction to follow. The second card represents the present position of the questioner. In this instance the death card might represent a major change in the questioner's life. Perhaps the questioner is a college student poised for graduation. Third card presents a possible outcome if the questioner continues to follow the direction that he or she is currently headed. Here the fool might suggest that the questioner's indecision will lead to recklessness if it is allowed to persist. Alternately the Magician might suggest that the questioner will be able to make things happen for him or herself. The one question reading is a very easy reading to learn and can be performed quickly. The questioner may wish to study the images on the cards to gain insight and inspiration. Because of its symbolism the tarot is an excellent tool for self-examination as it opens new avenues of thought.

The second type of reading is a standard reading method used by professional readers. The ten-card spread is designed to give a more in depth look at the life of the questioner in relation to one issue or several general themes. Ten cards should be chosen from the deck (face down) and laid in order of selection. The first card is representative of the questioner's present position, while the second card, laid sideways over the first card to form a cross, represents the events or obstacles that the questioner is presently facing. The third card is placed above the two cards and represents some of the current influences on the questioner. The fourth card sits below the first two cards and represents the past history to the questioner. The fifth card, placed directly to the right of the first two, is symbolic of the questioner's grounding. The sixth card is placed to the left of the first two cards and represents the near future influences on the questioner. At this point the cards should appear as a cross inside a square. The last four cards should be placed in a vertical line to the right of the square. The bottom card represents the questioner, while the second card up represents other people in the questioners life. The last two cards represent the hopes and fears of the questioner and the top card represents the outcome of events based on the current direction of the questioner.

These two readings or spreads can provide insight on virtually any issue, but there are several other options. Anyone wishing to learn how to read tarot cards should remember that although getting to know the cards is helpful, as Elmore explains, "Most readers will depend upon another reader to do a reading for them because that's where you can get away from your own bias. A lot of the times because of your personal bias you can be your own worst reader." It is also good to work on presenting the cards in a way that is not frightening. People are often wary of the cards because of their association

with things occult, but it is important to note that many of the things which scare people hold no real threat. The death card is often portrayed as a horrible omen of impending doom, when in reality the card merely represents completion or change. A good reader will not attempt to use the cards to scare his or her customers into paying more money. Unfortunately this practice is somewhat common, and anyone seeking a reading should be advised not to fall into a pattern of paying a fortune-teller who plays the insecurities of the questioner. Legitimate readers will try to help the questioner gain understanding of his or her life and situation, while presenting the cards in a non-threatening way.

Tarot has come a long way from its beginning as a game in Renaissance Italy. The practice of fortune telling with tarot cards may be as old as the cards themselves, but it has come out of hiding and evolved greatly since the fifteenth century. Today tarot is a creative channel for artists to express themselves as well as a fun and at times helpful fortune-telling tool. The game, too, has survived in Europe and provides an enjoyable past time for people, proving that despite the rules imposed on a society by governing authority such as church and state, (including bans on printing and playing certain card games) people will continue to follow their own practices.

Picture Notations

Page 1: Top to bottom, The Empress, the Heirophant, and the Five of Swords from the Visconti-Sforza Tarocchi Deck, U.S. Games Systems, 1975.

The Empress carries a shield bearing the Visconti family symbol of the black eagle, while her dress has a pattern of the Sforza family's interlocking diamond rings and the Ducal Crown.

The Heirophant's robe shows a pattern of Visconti Family Sunbursts, while the Five of Swords shows the Family Motto, "A bon droyt", or, "To the good the right."

Page 2: The Fool and the Magician from the Visconti-Sforza Tarocchi Deck, U.S. Games Systems, 1975.

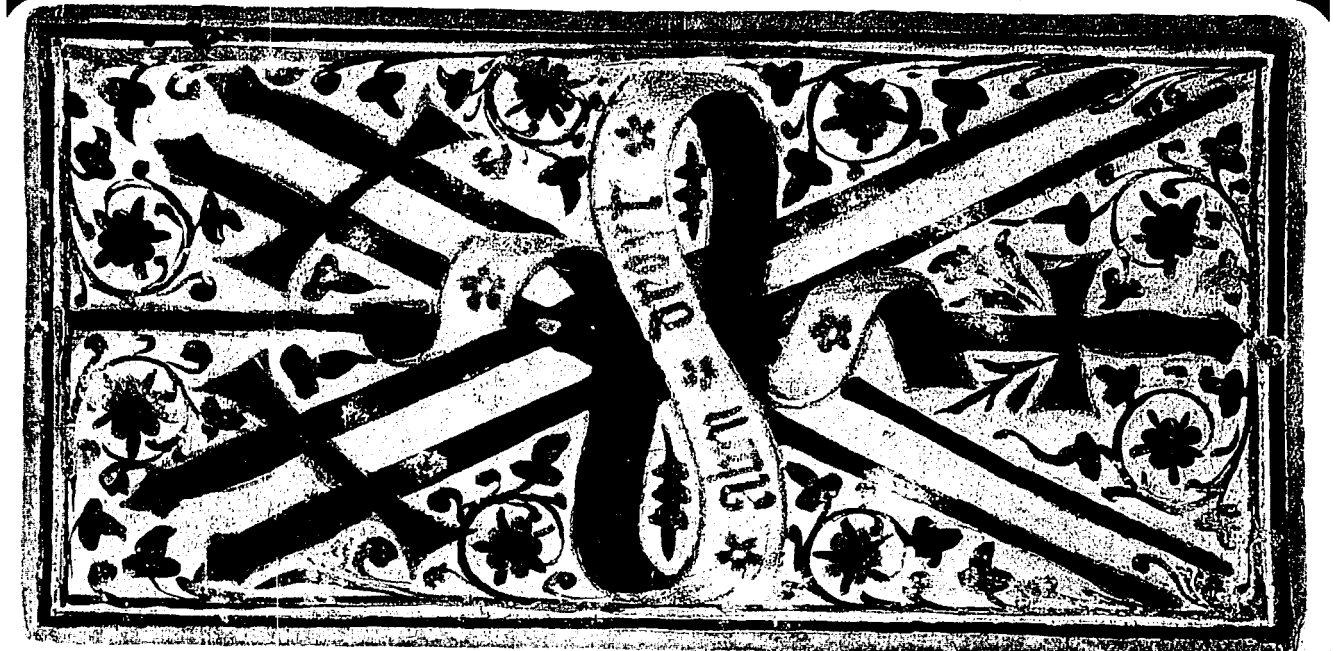
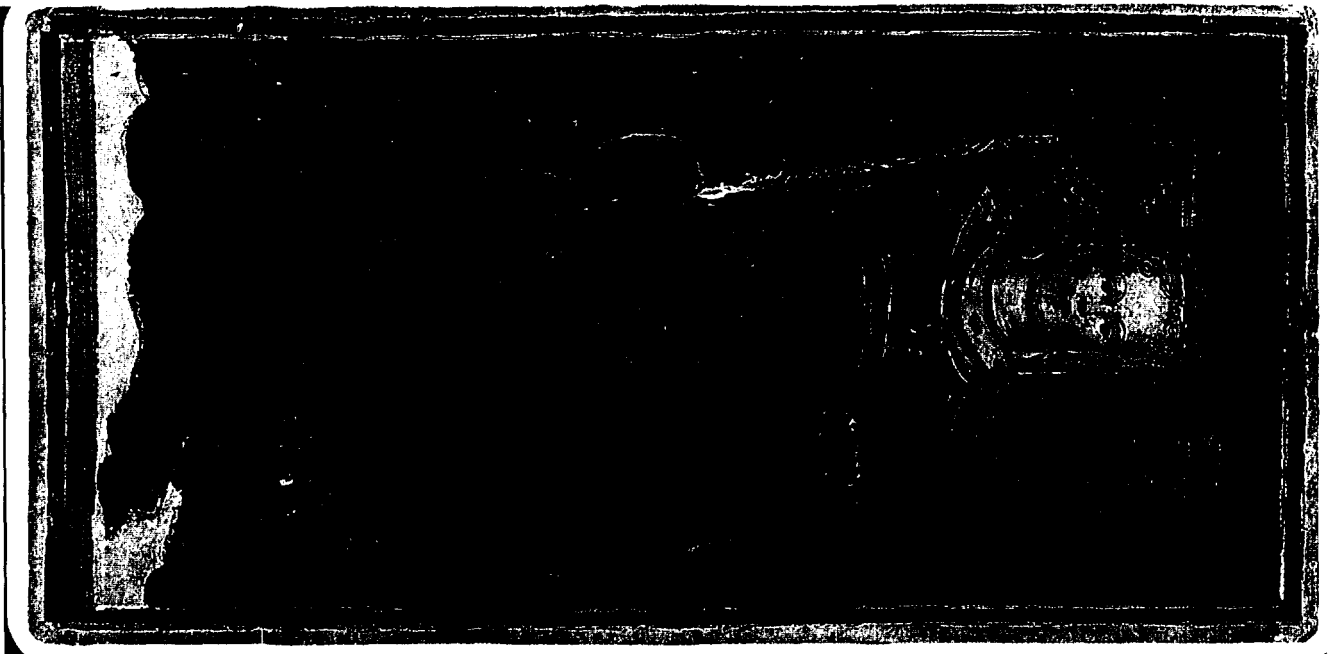
The Fool here appears as a bony and frail old man in rags, while the magician has brilliantly red clothing and appears as a sleight of hand magician or possibly a merchant measuring his goods. His tools are more practical than ceremonial.

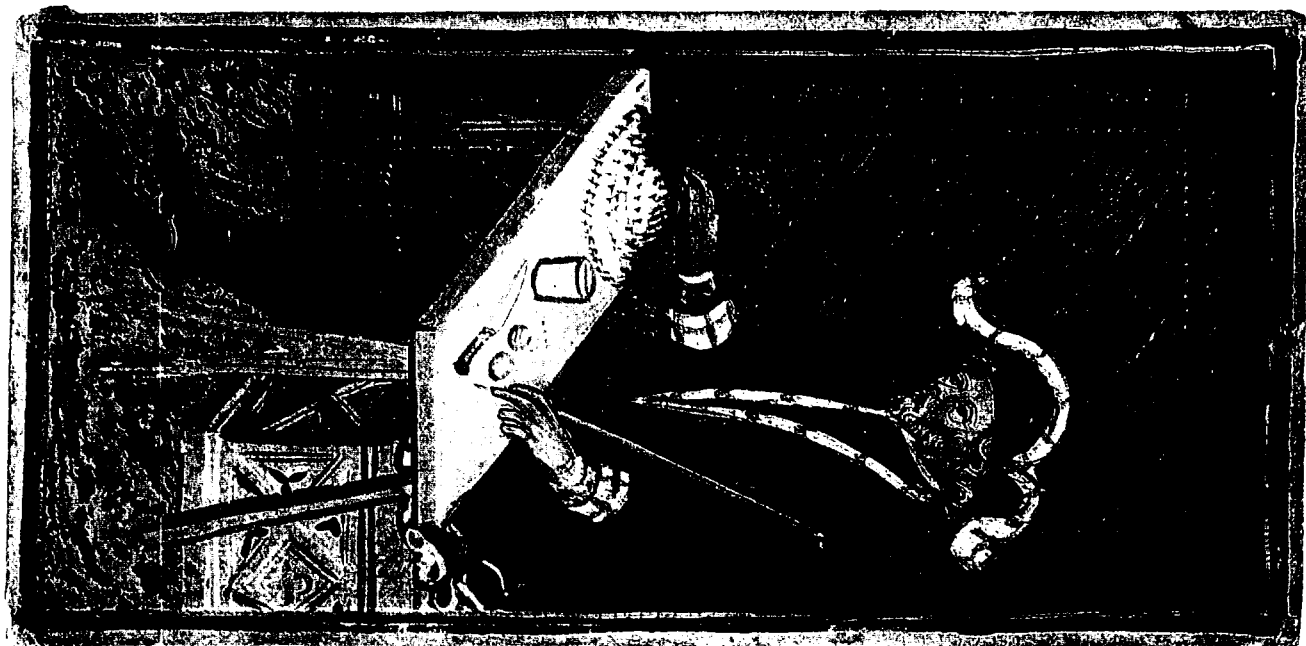
Page 3: The Fool and the Magician from the Paiche Tarot, circa 1780 (Kaplan, II.334)

The Fool here is much better off with his festive attire and dog in tow, while the magician has changed in appearance somewhat and definitely seems to be a practitioner of illusions with no serious magical purpose.

Page 4: The Magician cards from the Marseilles Tarot and Wirth's Tarot (Kaplan, II.156)

The Marseilles Magician is much like the Paiche Magician, a sleight of hand practitioner, while the Wirth Magician from the late nineteenth century is much more ceremonial, presented with symbolic objects.





From a private collection, Switzerland

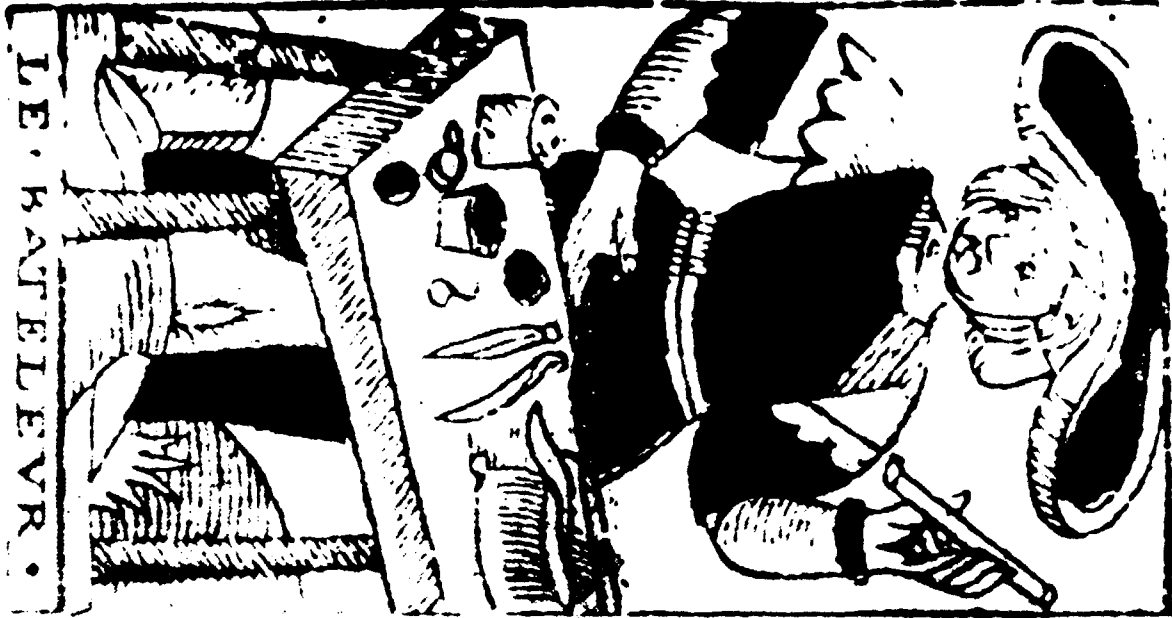


LE FOL

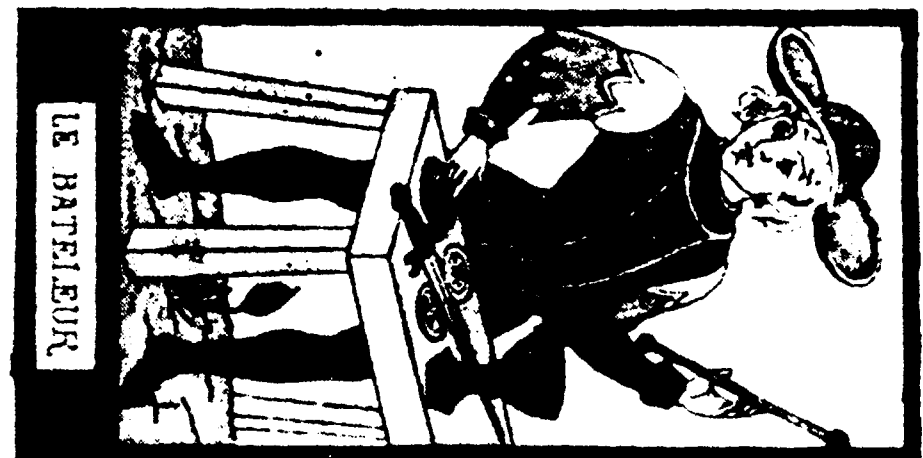


LE BATELEUR

Harry Campbell Collection, The Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut



Aleister Crowley Collection, Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas



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